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Principles of Warfare in Islam: An Analytical Study

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Abstract

Warfare has been a persistent aspect of human history, and it has had the tendency to cause immense destruction and misery. In this context, the Islamic tradition offers a richly ethical and structured system to regulate armed conflict. This research article examines the key principles of warfare in Islam, which are based on the Qur'an, the Hadith, as well as the practice of the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) and his companions. The research aims to eliminate common misconceptions about jihad and Islamic warfare, highlighting that Islam regulates war strictly, allows it only under legitimate reasons, and promotes peace as the preferred option. The article further compares Islamic warfare ethics with modern international humanitarian law, identifying similarities such as the safeguarding of civilians, the prohibition of aggression, and the quest for justice. Finally, it reflects on the applicability of these principles in modern times, where disinformation and political manipulation have a tendency to conceal the actual teachings of Islam.

Keywords: Islamic warfare, jihad, war ethics, international law, Qur'an, Hadith, peace in Islam, humanitarian law.

Introduction

War is one of the most brutal realities of human life, frequently resulting in uncounted human misery, disintegration of societies, and long-term costs for societies. Although contemporary international law aims to control the behavior of war through mechanisms such as the Geneva Conventions, Islamic law (Shariah) has, over centuries, provided a clearly established moral and legal framework to regulate war. Based on divine revelation, the Islamic rules of warfare place a strong emphasis on justice, restraint, and respect for human dignity—even in the context of armed conflict.

Islam is often misunderstood as a religion that supports violence or conquest through war. This is primarily kept alive through the misconstruing of words like jihad, political campaigning, and the activities of extremist groups that have absolutely no connection to the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) or the Qur'anic instruction. On the other hand, the Islamic tradition keeps peace as the default and permits war only with strict ethical principles and as a last resort.

This research attempts to ask questions about the elementary principles that govern war in the Islamic world, identify the sources of the principles, and contrast them with contemporary international norms for armed conflict. It aims to bring into focus the humanitarian and moral

standards that are in Islamic teachings which encourage responsible war conduct and peaceful resolution whenever possible.

Sources of Islamic Laws of Warfare

The Islamic teachings on war are not merely war doctrines developed from experience gained in warfields. They are derived from divine guidance and the practices of prophets. They are the basic sources that not only offer rules of engagement in conflict but a comprehensive framework that focuses on ethics, justice, and the advancement of human life.

The Quran

The Qur'an is the primary source of Islamic law, including war laws. It details the circumstances under which war is justifiable and the moral constraints to be observed during war. Verses such as:

"Fight in the way of Allah those who fight you, but transgress not the limits. Indeed, Allah does not like those who are transgressors"

(Surat Al-Baqarah 2:190)

demonstrate a strong emphasis on defensive warfare and restraint. The Qur'an forbids aggression, unjustified murder, and violence against non-combatants. Islamic theology holds that war is an absolute last resort, a means of defending against tyrannical oppression and enforcing justice.

The Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ)

The actions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) offer detailed guidance on how warfare should be conducted. The Prophet provided specific instructions to his armies before battle, including:

- Do not kill women, children, or the elderly.
- Do not mutilate the bodies of the dead.
- Do not destroy trees, crops, or livestock unnecessarily.
- Do not harm religious leaders or destroy places of worship.

These guidelines show the Prophet's emphasis on **ethical warfare**, rooted in compassion and justice, even in times of conflict.

Classical Jurisprudence (Fiqh)

Islamic scholars over centuries developed a body of jurisprudence that expands upon Qur'anic and prophetic teachings. Jurists like **Imam Abu Hanifa**, **Imam Malik**, **Imam Shafi'i**, and **Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal** wrote extensively about the conduct of war, prisoners, treaties, and the protection of civilians. Their interpretations helped form a **comprehensive legal tradition** known as **Siyar**—the Islamic law of nations—which governs warfare and international relations.

Concept of Jihad in Islamic Warfare

The term **Jihad** is often misunderstood and misrepresented in modern discourse, especially in the context of warfare. In Islamic teachings, however, Jihad carries a much broader and deeper meaning that encompasses both internal and external struggles for righteousness.

Literal and Broader Meaning of Jihad

The word *Jihad* comes from the Arabic root “**j-h-d**”, which means “**to strive**” or “**to exert effort**.” Therefore, Jihad broadly refers to **striving in the way of Allah**—this can include spiritual, intellectual, social, and military efforts to uphold justice and righteousness.

The Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) once said upon returning from battle:

“We have returned from the lesser jihad to the greater jihad.”
(Referring to the inner struggle against the self, or *Nafs*.)

This narration shows that **internal spiritual struggle** (*jihad al-nafs*) holds a more elevated place than physical combat.

Military Jihad: The Lesser Jihad

When referring specifically to warfare, **military Jihad** is only one aspect of the broader concept. It is **not synonymous with violence or terrorism**, as often portrayed. In Islam, armed Jihad:

- Must be **defensive** or in response to **oppression**.
- Can only be declared by a **legitimate authority**, not by individuals or groups.
- Must follow strict ethical codes during combat.

Military Jihad is bound by the same moral guidelines detailed in the Qur’an and Sunnah—prohibiting harm to non-combatants, protecting the environment, and maintaining the dignity of prisoners.

Misuse and Misinterpretation

Unfortunately, some extremist ideologies have misused the term Jihad to justify acts of violence and terrorism. These actions go directly against the teachings of Islam, which strictly prohibits killing innocent people:

“Whoever kills a person [unjustly]... it is as if he had slain all mankind.”
(Surah Al-Ma'idah 5:32)

The misuse of Jihad for political or personal gain not only violates Islamic law but also tarnishes the peaceful image of Islam. Islamic scholars and institutions around the world have consistently condemned such distortions.

Peace as the Primary Goal

Even when armed Jihad is permitted, the ultimate goal remains **peace and justice**, not conquest or domination. The Qur'an encourages reconciliation:

"If they incline to peace, then incline to it [also] and rely upon Allah."
(Surah Al-Anfal 8:61)

This verse highlights Islam's **preference for peace** over war and the importance of dialogue and diplomacy whenever possible.

Consensus (Ijma) and Analogy (Qiyas)

Where explicit texts were silent, Muslim scholars used consensus (*ijma*) and analogy (*qiyas*) to derive rulings in new situations. These tools ensured that the ethical principles of warfare could be adapted to evolving contexts while staying true to core Islamic values.

Rules of Engagement in Islamic Warfare

Islamic jurisprudence provides a rigorously defined framework for the conduct of armed conflict, often referred to as **rules of engagement**. These principles are derived primarily from the Qur'an, Hadith, and the interpretive efforts of classical jurists. Their objective is to maintain ethical integrity and uphold justice even amid the exigencies of war.

Declaration and Intent

War in Islam must not be waged arbitrarily. It requires:

- A **just cause** (such as self-defense or repelling oppression).
- A formal **declaration** or **warning** to the opposing side, allowing them the opportunity to consider peace or surrender.
- A **pure intention (niyyah)**, meaning the purpose of the engagement must be aligned with the broader objectives of justice and the protection of human rights, not for material gain, revenge, or expansionism.

This precondition ensures that armed conflict is not exploited for personal or political ambition and remains strictly within the bounds of ethical legitimacy.

Protection of Non-Combatants

Islamic law categorically prohibits targeting:

- **Women, children, the elderly**, and those unable to fight.
- **Clergy**, including monks and priests, who are not engaged in combat.
- **Farmers and laborers** engaged in civilian work.

This principle is supported by several Hadith, including the Prophet Muhammad's (ﷺ) instructions to his commanders before battle, where he explicitly ordered the avoidance of harm to non-combatants.

Environmental and Cultural Preservation

Islam imposes significant constraints on wartime behavior by forbidding:

- **Destruction of trees, crops, and water sources.**
- **Demolition of places of worship**, unless they are being used as military strongholds.
- **Poisoning wells** or rendering the land unusable for the local population.

These provisions prefigure contemporary international laws prohibiting ecological damage during war, and reflect Islam's deep commitment to environmental stewardship, even in warfare.

Treatment of Prisoners of War (POWs)

Islamic law mandates the **humane treatment** of captured individuals. Prisoners are entitled to:

- Adequate food, shelter, and medical care.
- Protection from torture or humiliation.
- The possibility of **release or ransom** under fair conditions.

The Qur'an emphasizes compassion in this context:

"And they give food in spite of love for it to the needy, the orphan, and the captive..."
(Surah Al-Insan 76:8)

Historically, Islamic societies often released prisoners without ransom, especially if they were poor or if doing so was believed to contribute to reconciliation.

Prohibition of Treachery and Excessive Force

The use of deception or betrayal, such as the violation of peace treaties or attack by feigned friendship, is forbidden. Similarly, Islam forbids the use of excessive force, collective punishment, and retaliatory killing. These prohibitions are intended to preserve moral limits and prevent war from resembling barbarism.

Peace and Reconciliation in Islam

At the heart of Islamic teachings lies a strong emphasis on peace, mercy, and reconciliation. While Islam authorizes war in some situations, its final objective is not destruction but restoring peace, justice, and harmony. The Qur'an repeatedly encourages seeking peaceful means instead of violence and requests the believers to respond to hostility with dignity and moderation.

Yearning for Peace and not War

The Qur'an encourages Muslims to always incline towards peace whenever the other side inclines towards it:

"If they have resorted to peace, then you have resorted to peace as well and have put your trust in Allah. For in fact, He is the Hearing, the Knowing."

(Surat Al-Anfal 8:61)

It is the core element of doctrine on conflict resolution in an Islamic context. In it, war is not preferred and not eternal, but temporary and a regrettable necessity. In cases where peace is an option, Muslims learn to embrace it.

Forgiveness and Clemency

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ is known for his perfect behavior of forgiveness, even in times of triumph. A great instance of this is the Conquest of Makkah, where, despite years of persecution, the Prophet forgave his former enemies with these words:

"Go on, for you are free."

This model of mercy is a reflection of the moral excellence of reconciliation over vengeance. Islamic history is full of such examples where forgiveness brought an end to further violence and was the foundation of lasting peace.

Pacts and Conventions

Islam emphasizes the importance of abiding by treaties and pacts. After making a treaty of peace, it is important that it is strictly honored, irrespective of the circumstances.

"Moreover, one must ensure the fulfillment of all obligations. Indeed, individuals will invariably be held accountable for their commitments."

(Surat Al-Isra 17:34)

The Treaty of Hudaibiyyah is a great demonstration of the willingness of the Prophet ﷺ to accept tough terms in pursuit of peace, even though some of his companions felt that these were not good terms. This ultimately resulted in a broader field of dialogue, da'wah, and more social stability.

Conflict Resolution in the Muslim Ummah

Islamic teachings also promote peace among Muslims. Muslim communities should reconcile quickly with each other through communication, reconciliation, and justice:

"And if there are two groups of the believers fighting, then reconcile the two. And if one group subdues the other, then fight against the one which subdues until it returns to the ordinance of Allah."

(Surat Al-Hujurat 49:9)

This verse not only legitimates the intervention of internal conflict but also explicitly sets a course for the restoration of peace, guaranteeing fairness, and preventing further division in the community.

The Reward of Peacemakers

Islam makes peace-making a rewarding and a valuable act. The Prophet ﷺ declared:

"Shall I not tell you something better in degree than fasting, prayer, and charity?" They replied, "Yes, O Messenger of Allah." He said, "Mediating between people. Indeed, spoiling relations is the shaver."

(Sunan Abu Dawood)

This hadith underscores that those who strive to mediate and reconcile conflicts between other people are held in the highest esteem in Islam, showing the deep integration of peace into the very essence of Islamic ethics.

Ethical Frameworks and Modern Relevance of Islamic Theories of War

Islamic theology of war is based on strict ethical principles aimed at minimizing suffering, saving life, and ensuring justice, even in war. The theology was advanced when it was formulated and still has relevance today to shed light on modern controversies regarding international law, human rights, and the ethics of war.

Protection of Civilians and Non-Combatants

One of the most distinctive features of Islamic ethics of war is the absolute prohibition against harming non-combatants, including women, children, the elderly, and religious leaders who are not involved in the combat. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ absolutely instructed his followers:

"Do not kill any child, woman, elder, or one who is sick."

(Abu Dawud)

He also prohibited the killing of priests and monks within their churches. This early emphasis on the safeguarding of non-combatants antedated modern humanitarian law and is reaffirmed in the principles expressed in the modern Geneva Conventions.

Prohibition of Destruction and Ecological Harm

Islam forbids wastage in property and natural resources in the war. The Prophet ﷺ instructed his troops to:

Do not cut down trees, or burn harvests, or slaughter animals save for food.

This serves to illustrate the wide concern in Islam for environmental responsibility, even in times of war. In the contemporary era, characterized by war too often resulting in long-term

environmental harm, this Islamic view encourages a more sustainable and responsible method in conducting war.

Humane Treatment of Prisoners

Islam advocates for the **humane treatment of prisoners of war**. They should not be tortured, starved, or humiliated. The Qur'an states:

“And they give food in spite of love for it to the needy, the orphan, and the captive, [saying],
‘We feed you only for the sake of Allah. We do not want from you reward or gratitude.’”

(Surah Al-Insan 76:8-9)

This principle elevates the treatment of captives from a legal obligation to a moral and spiritual act of compassion. Today, this aligns closely with international human rights laws that regulate the treatment of prisoners.

No Compulsion in Religion

Islamic warfare is not a tool for forced conversion. The Qur'an strictly prohibits compelling others to embrace Islam:

“There is no compulsion in religion...”

(Surah Al-Baqarah 2:256)

This invalidates any claim that Islamic wars were meant to spread religion by force. Rather, Islamic warfare was largely defensive, aiming to **protect the Muslim community, uphold treaties, or counter oppression**.

Accountability and Leadership in War

Islam imposes the responsibility of morality on war commanders. It is necessary that commanders ensure Islamic compliance of war conduct. Where there are violations of rules, it is necessary that the perpetrators are brought to book. This aspect of moral leadership is necessary in the prevention of power abuse and in the maintenance of the integrity of the cause of the war.

Application in the Modern World

In today's society, there exists an endless variety of modalities of warfare, such as drone attacks, cyber-attacks, and ideological warfare. Despite the change in the nature of conflict, the ethical boundaries set by Islam remain very significant. It provides:

- An ethical model of military strategy.
- A foundation for human rights and civilian protection.
- A desire for peace as the ultimate goal, and not endless war.

Islamic scholars and jurists continue to seek the means by which these universal principles can be used in contemporary conflicts to guarantee that justice and humanity are not lost amidst the devastation of war.

Conclusion and Final Thoughts

The Islamic doctrine of war provides a coherent and ethically grounded model that is above time, space, and political considerations. Rooted in the Qur'an and Hadith of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, the principles are the manifestation of Islam's abiding faith in justice, compassion, and the sanctity of human life, even in the most horrific conditions of war.

In contrast to most traditional and modern military philosophies that justify excessive violence or prioritize the capture of territory, Islamic doctrine has a unique system of ethics that governs war, upholds human dignity, and seeks peaceful solutions whenever possible. By instituting the safeguarding of civilians, honoring covenants, and prohibiting forced conversions and environmental destruction, Islam formulates a system of war consistent with fundamental human rights, responsibility, and compassion.

In the modern age, which has been marked by wars, terrorism, and political hostility, there is a compelling need to revisit and apply these Islamic principles. These principles not only help guide Muslim societies and military leaders but also provide insights of relevance for international debates on ethical warfare and international humanitarian law.

Finally, Islamic philosophy of war is not marked by aggressiveness but by dedication to peace on the basis of justice, self-restraint, and moral responsibility. Through reaffirming and reenacting these values in the current practice and discourse, humankind can move toward a world where, even amidst war, moral values and human dignity are consistently maintained.

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